

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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WILDLIFE AGENTS RAID DEALERS OF PROTECTED BIRD FEATHERS

Undercover agents from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and State wildlife agencies in Arizona, New Mexico and Oklahoma coordinated a massive raid on February 21 and 22 against dealers of feathers and artifacts from protected birds. Armed with search warrants, 45 State officers and 40 FWS special agents seized feathers and finished craft items valued at more than a half-million dollars from 35 individuals in New Mexico and Oklahoma, and 30 businesses in Arizona.

Feathers from songbirds to eagles are involved in the cases. A 14-month undercover investigation into this trade revealed that feathers from over 4,000 scissor-tailed flycatchers, 155 eagles (including 15 endangered bald eagles) and hundreds of woodpeckers, hawks, owls and other protected birds were offered for sale.

In addition to special protection for eagles, all wild birds except certain starlings, domestic pigeons and English sparrows are protected under Federal or State laws. Illegal killing of these birds continues, however, to supply a large and lucrative market throughout the country for Native American arts and crafts items. Indian war bonnets made with eagle feathers can bring over \$1,000 from collectors. Peyote fans, clusters of feathers used traditionally for Indian religious ceremonies, are valued between \$400 to \$600 each.

In Oklahoma, six FWS agents and eight officers from the Department of Wildlife Conservation seized thousands of feathers from eagles, scissor-tailed flycatchers (Oklahoma's State bird), woodpeckers and hawks, plus finished war bonnets and peyote fans from individuals in the communities of Fairfax, Anadarko, and Elgin. Scissor-tailed flycatchers are killed for only two of their long tail feathers to make the decorative peyote fans; as many as 30 to 40 birds are used to make each fan. As a result of this pressure, the bird has disappeared or declined drastically in many parts of Oklahoma.

In New Mexico, 25 officers from the Game and Fish Department assisted FWS agents in 14 raids in Farmington, Kirtland, Bloomfield, Gallup, Santo Domingo, Isleta and Acomita. Agents seized four war bonnets made with feathers from bald and golden eagles, 100 peyote fans, 10 Kachina dolls, and 100,000 feathers from 20 species of birds valued at more than \$190,000. Agents also made two arrests.

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In Arizona, FWS agents with 12 officers from the Game and Fish Department and six officers from the Department of Public Safety (White Collar-Organized Crime Unit) raided 36 businesses in Tucson and 21 in Phoenix. Thirty of these stores were found to be selling illegal wildlife products; agents confiscated 178 Kachina dolls valued at \$50,000 and endangered hawksbill turtle jewelry valued at \$4,700.

A total of 35 individuals, including 10 Native Americans, are under investigation and may be charged by U.S. Attorneys in Phoenix, Albuquerque, Oklahoma City and Tulsa, with violating the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Eagle Protection Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Selling or bartering in violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act is a felony punishable by a fine of not more than \$2,000 and/or imprisonment for not more than two years.

The violations in these cases generally involved sales of feathers and craft items to undercover agents. The FWS provides Native Americans with eagle feathers for religious uses only from a feather repository in Pocatello, Idaho, and does not allow them to be traded, bartered or sold. The FWS has also provided Indians with waterfowl wings and tails, and other wildlife products obtained from hunting surveys. Possession of these items is legal but not sale or trade. Indian leaders have supported prosecution of these violations and have spoken out against this exploitation of their heritage and religion.

Service agents estimate the illegal trade in protected bird feathers approaches one million dollars annually in this country. The loss to America's wildlife from this trade is enormous; tens of thousands of birds are killed illegally each year.

"Leads generated from these raids will result in further investigation," said Jerry Stegman, Acting Regional Director of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Albuquerque. "As a result of this operation we have hundreds of new leads. We will continue our crackdown on this grisly trade, and seek maximum prosecution in court cases. Three things are necessary for this trade--the killers of the animals, the traffickers of their parts, and the buyer. If people will quit buying these products the other two will die out and this needless waste of wildlife will cease."

The 14-month operation was coordinated by the Justice Department's Division of Land and Natural Resources (Wildlife Section), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, State wildlife departments in Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, and U.S. Attorneys in the three States.